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ABSTRACT

An evaluation of Los Angeles City College's Learning Skills Center (LSC) was conducted in order to ascertain the nature of the LSC's outcomes. The LSC offers students an opportunity to participate in diagnostic and prescriptive open-entry open-exit programs in an individualized setting. Types of programs available through the LSC include communication skills, quantitative skills, and tutoring in other college-level courses. The evaluation of the LSC considered three specific areas: the first consisted of analyses of data gathered in relation to specific program objectives, the second examined unexpected spinoffs, and the third considered the humanistic characteristics of the LSC. Results of the evaluation indicated: (1) students who utilized the LSC's services in the areas of basic math, basic English, accounting, business, and chemistry were associated with significantly lower dropout rates than were students who enrolled in these courses but did not utilize the LSC; (2) the LSC had gained the support of the Academic Senate and a number of departments traditionally opposed to remedial courses; and (3) numerous students who had used the LSC offered favorable personal evaluations of the Center. A critique of the causal-comparative method employed in the study is included. (JDS)

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EVALUATING AND AUDITING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE
LEARNING SKILLS CENTER PROGRAM:
SECOND YEAR*

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The Learning Skills Center (LSC) at Los Angeles City College, established in October, 1974, through a Los Angeles Community College District grant, is an individualized learning laboratory which offers assistance to students in (1) communication skills (including reading comprehension and speed), oral communication, functional writing problems, spelling and vocabulary, note-taking, library and media technology, and study skills; (2) quantitative skills, including quantitative reasoning from basic arithmetic computations through calculus; and (3) tutoring in other college-level courses, literally from Anatomy to Zoology.

FUNCTION

Services to students are available on a voluntary and/or referral basis. Students may come in on their own or counselors and instructors may refer them to the LSC for specific skill development to reinforce course work. Students may participate in the LSC for Credit or No Credit and enter and discontinue at any time during the year--in short, they may participate in an open-entry/open-exit program that is diagnostic and prescriptive. If a student decides in advance that he wants to enroll in the LSC, he may pre-enroll or go through the regular admissions procedures. If he decides at any time during the semester that he would like to enroll in the LSC for credit, he is eligible. (A student who chooses to do so may also participate in various LSC programs for No Credit.)

When a student comes to the LSC, his language and mathematics skills are diagnostically assessed. On the basis of diagnostic assessments, a program is prescribed for him, tailored to his needs, and designed to help develop his academic potential. A subsequent test is made 6 to 8 weeks later to see if the program is working. If it is not, a new prescription is developed for him. Moreover, if a student has difficulty with LSC materials or with other course work, a tutor is assigned to help him overcome other learning problems he may be experiencing.

FUNCTION (cont'd.)

All students' work at the LSC is individualized and self-paced; a student functions individually in the learning skills program, taking as much time as he needs, whether it is one week or several months. Helping to create a student's positive self-image is a fundamental thrust of the individualized programs in the LSC. SUCCESS is built in to each of the programs.

PROGRAM EVALUATION AND AUDIT

The Coordinator of the LSC decided to build an evaluation and management control system into the operation for several reasons: (1) to provide a system of accountability; (2) to demonstrate to those interested what was happening in the LSC; (3) to determine what objectives and plans were appropriate for the Los Angeles City College campus, its students, and faculty; (4) to plan a definite course of action to structure an amorphous situation because students and faculty were generally unknown quantities; and (5) to validate the LSC as a valuable operation. Three years later, we continue the evaluation and audit process because (1) we still believe in accountability; (2) planning a definite course of action to structure the future of the LSC is of crucial importance, particularly with the advent of Master Plans and Five Year Forecasts demanded yearly by the Los Angeles City College District; (3) to maintain a structure through which we can continually assess and process appropriate plans for the campus to meet the needs of students and faculty; and (4) to continue to validate the achievements of students in LSC programs.

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES?

The outcomes of the LSC program evaluation are divided into three parts. The first consists of analyses of the data gathered in relation to specific program objectives, the second is unexpected and interesting spinoffs, and the third is a series of short vignettes emphasizing its idiosyncratic and humanistic characteristics.

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES? (cont'd.)

Part 1 -- Degree of Accomplishment of the Program Objectives

- a. When compared to students enrolled in basic math who do not avail themselves of the services of the LSC, students who are concurrently enrolled in the LSC and basic math courses were associated with significantly lower ($p < .001$) dropout rates during the academic year 1976-77.

Table 1

A chi-square (χ^2) test of independence between the course completion and dropout rates of basic math students; one group used the college learning skills center (LSC), the other did not.

	course completion	dropouts
LSC	321	52
non LSC	595	263

$$\chi^2 = 38.13 *$$

* $p < .001$

- b. When compared to students enrolled in basic English courses who do not avail themselves of the services of the LSC, students who are concurrently enrolled in the LSC and basic English courses were associated with significantly lower ($p < .001$) dropout rates during the academic year 1976-77.

Table 2

A chi-square (χ^2) test of independence between the course completion and dropout rates of basic English students; one group used the college LSC, the other did not.

	course completion	dropouts
LSC	221	31
non LSC	517	268

$$\chi^2 = 44.34 *$$

* $p < .001$

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES? (cont'd.)

- c. When compared to students enrolled in accounting courses who do not avail themselves of the services of the LSC, the students who are concurrently enrolled in the LSC and accounting courses were associated with significantly lower ($p < .005$) dropout rates during the academic year 1976-77.

Table 3

A chi-square (χ^2) test of independence between the course completion and dropout rates of **accounting** students; one group used the college LSC, the other did not.

	course completion	dropouts
LSC	148	21
non LSC	380	116

$$\chi^2 = 9.26 *$$

* $p < .005$

- d. When compared to students enrolled in business courses who do not avail themselves of the services of the LSC, the students who are concurrently enrolled in the LSC and business courses were associated with significantly lower ($p < .001$) dropout rates during the academic year 1976-77.

Table 4

A chi-square (χ^2) test of independence between the course completion and dropout rates of **business** students; one group used the college LSC, the other did not.

	course completion	dropouts
LSC	234	34
non LSC	554	161

$$\chi^2 = 11.85 *$$

* $p < .001$

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES? (cont'd.)

- e. When compared to students enrolled in chemistry courses who do not avail themselves of the services of the LSC, the students who are concurrently enrolled in the LSC and chemistry courses were associated with significantly lower ($p < .001$) dropout rates during the academic year 1976-77.

Table 5

A chi-square (X^2) test of independence between the course completion and dropout rates of chemistry students; one group used the college LSC, the other did not.

	course completion	dropouts
LSC	139	33
non LSC	310	197

$$X^2 = 22.18 *$$

* $p < .001$

- f. Eighty-one point nine percent (81.9%) of the LSC users (1178) were economic opportunities program and services (EOPS) qualified.
- g. Sixty-one point forty-six percent (61.46%) of the students using the LSC were vocational education majors.

A previous evaluation of the LSC, reported in ERIC Document ED 121 408, used a comprehensive study of persistence rates as comparison data. It was conducted by Dr. Ben Gold, Director of Research at Los Angeles City College. This evaluation employed the persistence and dropout rates of the students in classes who were not availing themselves of the services of the LSC with those who were. This type research is ex post facto causal-comperative.**

** Adopted from Van Dalen and W. J. Meyer Understanding Educational Research. New York: Mc Graw-Hill, 1966 (Rev.).

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES? (cont'd.)

A more powerful experimental method was not possible. The method involves a group which received a treatment (remedial help at the LSC) and which was observed to see whether the result would be a high persistence rate in basic academic class as compared to a group which did not receive the treatment but were involved in the basic academic classes.

There are weakness and advantages in the causal-comparative method. Some of the weaknesses are:

1. Lack of control over independent variables.
2. The difficulty in being certain that the relevant causative factor is actually included among the many factors involved.
3. The complication that no single factor is the cause of an outcome but some combination and interaction of factors go together under certain conditions to yield a given outcome.
4. A phenomenon may result not only from multiple causes but also from one cause in one instance and from another cause in another instance.
5. When a relationship between two variables is discovered, determining which is the cause and which the effect may be difficult if not impossible.
6. The fact that two, or more, factors are related does not necessarily imply a cause-effect relationship. They all may be related to an additional factor not recognized or observed.
7. Classifying students into dichotomous groups (e.g., "persisters" and "dropouts") for the purpose of comparison is fraught with problems, since such categories are vague, variable, and transitory. Such investigations do not yield many useful findings.
8. Comparative studies in "natural" situations, for example, **an intact class** or set of classes, do not allow controlled selection of subjects.

Advantages of the causal-comparative method are:

1. It provides a means of attacking problems which cannot be studied in an experimental setting.
2. It yields valuable information concerning the nature of phenomena: of what goes with what, under what conditions, in what orders or patterns, and the like.

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES? (cont'd.)

3. Improvements in techniques, tools, and partial controls have made such studies defensible especially in the evaluation of educational programs. It is valuable because it provides information on which decisions can be based to continue and expand effective programs. Further, the causal-comparative method of evaluation allows the decision makers to be much more confident than they would be without this limited form of analysis.

For the purposes of this comparative investigation the dropout rate in English is operationally defined as the total dropout rate in English 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, and 65. In other words, students in all six English classes were combined into a total English group. The results of these comparisons are given above.

Similarly, the dropout rate in basic math classes were defined as the dropout rate for the group of students in Mathematics 30 and 31. The dropout rate in accounting is a combination of Accounting I and II. The dropout rate in chemistry is an aggregate of Chemistry 1, 2, 3, and 11. The dropout rate in business takes into account both Business 1 and 38.

In all the comparisons, it would appear that the students who avail themselves of the services of the LSC have a much higher probability (the confidence level ranges from 99.5% to 99.9%) of being able to complete the courses mentioned above than students who do not seek assistance at the Learning Skills Center of Los Angeles City College. This result has been demonstrated before,² decision makers at Los Angeles City College have noted these results, and have made judgments to continue to support the LSC.

Part 2 -- Unexpected and Interesting Spinoffs

- . The Curriculum Committee, responsible for recommending which courses should be accepted or rejected by the Academic Senate, demanded that

² See, ERIC document ED 121 408.

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES? (cont'd.)

all new course outlines be written in terms of competency-based education so that students could know exactly what was expected in the course. Furthermore, the Curriculum Committee notified all instructors that course outlines must follow a management-by-objectives format if the committee were to consider the proposed course for approval. In all of this, there was official Academic Senate approval and support.

- . The Academic Senate, which had traditionally opposed all remediation on the LACC campus, took the stand in March, 1977, finally supporting remedial programs on the LACC campus and stipulated that all remediation ought to occur in the Learning Skills Center. To be consistent with the policy the Senate rejected what it interpreted as being three remedial courses from the English Department.
- . The Math Department at LACC, an ardent opponent of the Learning Skills Center, in March, 1977, helped to design and steer through the Academic Senate an algebra course that was the equivalent of the department's own algebra course, but in an alternative learning style. Moreover, the Math Department agreed to have the LSC's Algebra course listed in both the school catalogue and schedule of classes as the equivalent of Math 31.
- . The LACC Black Faculty Association in April, 1977, issued a formal statement opposing the "proliferation" of remedial courses on the campus until it could be determined what the remedial courses that already existed were doing. However, the resolution made it clear that LSC courses were exceptions because the association felt it already knew what achievements students made after participating in LSC programs.
- . All Student Assistant Funds (District funds for tutoring) were invested in the Learning Skills Center with the agreement of all departments on

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES? (cont'd.)

the campus because the LSC had proved the positive effects of its tutoring and programs through the built-in evaluation and audit.

Part 3 -- Idiosyncratic and Humanistic Characteristics

The above outcomes are important but are seen by some as cold because they deal with objective data, tests of comparisons, and decisions that flow therefrom. It was felt that the human element ought to be reported also, to emphasize the idiosyncratic and humanistic aspects of the LSC program. Below are some anecdotes collected from LSC students:

E. W., a 35 year old mother of 5 boys, says, "I can't believe that I actually wrote several 'experimental' compositions on loneliness for my English instructor and now my psychology teacher wants to read them because of my philosophy. I expect to receive extra credit for those compositions in psychology!" E. W., also adds that, "Thanks to Psych 22, I passed the chemistry screening test at the beginning of the semester and was able to take Chem 1."

J. T., in her middle twenties, came to the LSC to improve her math skills and to prepare for the nursing entrance exam. She completed the LSC basic math program and improved her skills more than 5 years. She subsequently came in to report that she passed her nursing exams and was accepted in LACC's Nursing Program.

W. T., a 20 year old man, had difficulty in elementary algebra. At the LSC, he discovered his problem was not algebra, but basic math. He enrolled in the Basic Math program in the LSC, improved his skills more than 3 years, and took Algebra the next semester. W. T. received an "A" in algebra in the Math Department.

R. T., in his early twenties, missed one week of class because of a change in his work schedule. He came to the LSC for help with material

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES? (cont'd.)

covered in his math class during his absence. He returned to the LSC two days later to let us know that, "I got an 'A' on my final exam and an 'A' in the course."

J. T., an orthopedically handicapped woman in her early fifties, claims, "A world opened up to me in the Math program and now I'm ready to pursue higher math. I'd never have made the decision to take math, though, if it hadn't been for the LSC."

B. M., a man about twenty years old, writes, "I originally thought little of tutoring, but since entering this LSC program, my grades have greatly improved."

G. K., a professional disc jockey in his late 30's, is delighted that, "Since all of my diagnostic assessments were so high, I was able to do a special project on the history of the radio (my love!) for credit. I was able to put the project on tape like a real broadcast!"

A. H., a partially sighted student in her late 40's, is always expressing surprise at how friendly and comfortable the LSC is and how genuinely glad we are to see her.

K. H., an orthopedically handicapped woman of 25, writes, "I am so glad you made me aware of my manipulative ways, and I am so grateful that you encouraged me to do my own work and accept the responsibility for the results."

H. F., age 60 and mother of 7, says, "After this experience, I feel I can achieve in any course on the campus!"

L. E., age 22, writes, "The LSC is helpful and beneficial to me; since I enrolled in the reading program, I can read and spell better."

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES? (cont'd.)

J. E., a 19 year old man, informs us that, "I have read my first book in my life! I couldn't have done it without your reading program."

E. D., age 75, says, "I feel so guilty missing sessions at the LSC, I have to call daily to let you know I am still ill and not to drop me."

M. A., writes, "Without this learning skill (sic) center, I personally would be in very bad shape. And as a June grad, I can not (sic) afford it."

Y. P., a 38 year old mother of 3 writes, "Your reading program has helped me so much. Before I started in the program, I read slow and had to go over and over a paragraph several times before I could completely understand it. After being in your program, I read three times faster, with complete comprehension. I also get better grades in my classes. I plan to take one of your other programs in the Fall. Thank you very much for your help."

P. G., a 78 year old man, writes, "I am very grateful for your help in library techniques. The library program has helped me in my other subjects when I needed some reference material to refer to. Before I began this course, I had not been beyond the dictionary in a library. I really have gained a good deal of information on how to use a library."

Stories like the foregoing can be heard daily around the LSC, which sees more than 300 students a day. No one around the LSC asks, "What's happening?" They all know: "Learning's happening!"

SUMMARY

It has been demonstrated that the Los Angeles City College Learning Skills Center is meeting student needs in several ways. It provides them with the capacity to complete basic academic courses. It serves a large percentage (82%) of EOPS qualified and a preponderance (61%) of students who are vocational education majors. And, it builds students self-esteem; anecdotal records, some of which were in the body of this paper, attest to that. Please draw your own conclusions regarding the value of the Learning Skills Center program.

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